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Three Levels of Prayer

Matthew 7:7-11

Today we are beginning a new sermon series called Adventures in Prayer. For the next seven Sundays we will look at some of the great prayer promises of the New Testament. Right up front I want you to know that I have no desire to add to your guilt. Almost everyone I know feels secretly guilty about prayer in the sense that most of us feel like we ought to pray more than we do. It won't help you for me to add to your burden. My goal is to increase your joy by showing you the boundless possibilities of prayer.

Last Thursday night my wife and I ate supper with our longtime friends, Tom and Fay Phillips, at the Outback Steak House in New Port Richey, Florida. Tom is the director of Word of Life Florida where I was speaking in a Bible conference Monday through Friday. During our conversation Tom mentioned that he felt that prayer was the one area of the spiritual life where he struggles the most. He said that even though he gets up before 5:30 AM every day to pray and read his Bible, he still feels this is an area where he needs more growth. As I reflected on his words, it occurred to me that Tom is one of the most godly men I know. He has a walk with God that is obvious to all who know him and his integrity is beyond reproach. Yet he said what I would say and what most Christian leaders would say. We all wish we were stronger in the area of prayer.



RAY PRITCHARD

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There are at least three things that hinder us from going deeper in prayer. The first is the sneaking suspicion that prayer doesn't matter. It's easy to fall into a kind of fatalism that says "God's gonna do what God's gonna do." So we stop praying because we think nothing will change. Then there is the fear that we won't pray in the "right" way, that we won't use the correct words or we won't use the right formula and that God therefore won't even bother to hear what we say. Finally most of us struggle with the little voice inside that tells us we've got more important things to do. Prayer is good but we need to get on with the "real business" of the day. So we don't pray as we ought or as we would like.

Keep on Asking!

Rather than deal with those hindrances, let me simply share some very good news: God welcomes prayer. He wants us to pray, he begs us to pray, he exhorts us to pray, and he pleads with us to pray. Prayer is God's appointed means for us to receive what we need from him.

In the familiar words of our text, Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock. Those words are in the present tense in the Greek language. You could legitimately translate them this way: Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking at the door. This means that prayer requires persistence. Few prayers are answered the first time we pray them. But God's delays do not mean he doesn't care. We are to ask, ask, and keep on asking. We are to seek, seek, and keep on seeking. We are to knock, knock, and keep on knocking. If we do, we will receive, find, and the door will be opened to us.

What this passage teaches can be summarized in three statements:

God wants to answer our prayers.

Our prayers will be answered but not immediately.

We should lay aside our doubts and continue to pray because of who God is.

The words of Walt Gerber are a great encouragement at this point: "Remember, when praying for others, we are not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of his highest willingness."

I. Three Levels of Prayer 7-8

These famous words of Jesus describe three levels of prayer. Not all prayer is alike in its basic nature. Sometimes we are asking, sometimes we are seeking, and sometimes our prayers are like knocking at the door of heaven.

Level 1: Asking

Ask and it will be given to you ... for everyone who asks receives (Matthew 7:7, 8).

Go to Africa or India and you will understand what this means. Asking is what beggars do. In poor countries beggars unashamedly stand by the road with their hands held out, asking alms for the poor. Sometimes they can be quite bold about it and even irritating to passers by. In those moments it helps to remember that you would be bold too if you were in their position.

Jesus tells us that prayer begins with the posture of a beggar coming before a benevolent Heavenly Father. We are to ask God for what we need, knowing that he is able to help us. The promise is very simple: Ask and you shall have. Level one praying involves the basic needs of life. If you need food, ask God for it. If you need money to pay the bills, ask God for it. If you need wisdom, if you need guidance, if you are confused, if you are in need of physical healing, do not be ashamed or embarrassed to bring your needs to the Lord in your

prayers. This is what it means to ask God for “daily bread.” Asking involves laying all of life before the Lord in order that you might receive from him whatever you need.

Notice how broad the promise is. It extends to “everyone who asks.” And see how definite the promise is. Everyone who asks “receives.” Not “shall receive” or “might receive” or “may receive” but simply “receives.”

Prayer begins with asking God for what we need, knowing that when we ask, we will receive an answer from heaven.

Level 2: Seeking

Seek and you will find ... he who seeks finds (Matthew 7:7, 8).

Seeking implies a desire for something of great value. It reminds us of Jesus’ story of the woman searching for a lost coin or the shepherd with 100 sheep who, having lost one, left the 99 and went searching for the one sheep that had gone astray. It is like a man seeking a pearl of great price, who having found it, gives all that he has in order to purchase it.

When you seek something, you rearrange your priorities so that you can search for what you desire until you find it. This kind of prayer is usually tied up with the search for deeper understanding, particularly as it applies to the trials of life. In 2 Corinthians 12 we learn about Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what it was because Paul doesn’t tell us. Three times he asked the Lord to remove it and three times the Lord said no. That’s the first level of prayer—Asking. But he kept on praying for insight and God eventually said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” This is level two praying—Seeking wisdom from the Lord. While the thorn was

not removed (and evidently was never removed), Paul gained important spiritual insight that helps us see why his first prayers were not answered. This kind of answer comes only as we repeatedly seek the Lord.

Level 3: Knocking

Knock and the door will be opened to you ... and to him who knocks, the door will be opened (Matthew 7:7, 8).

The word “knock” means to stand at a door and repeatedly rap it with your knuckles. You knock and wait, then you knock again, then you say, “I know you’re in there,” then you knock again and say, “I can hear your voice. Come on, open the door.” Then you knock again. If you’re on the other side, you know how annoying it can be to listen as someone knocks and knocks and keeps on knocking. But that’s precisely the picture behind these words. They imply praying in the face of difficulty and even resistance. If you knock like this, your desire for entrance must be very great indeed. In the New Testament, the picture of “open doors” often deals with seeking God’s will and praying for new opportunities to spread the gospel. It also applies to praying when the object desired involves changing the heart of another person.

Not long ago a fine young couple came to see me with the good news that they plan to be missionaries. They are eminently qualified and will do a wonderful job and there is only one small problem. After months of prayer they have no idea where they would like to go. And they can’t start raising support until they at least know what country they are going to. As we talked I said something like this: “The reason you don’t know now is because you don’t need to know now. If you needed to know now, God would have shown you. Since you don’t know now, it must be true that you don’t need to know because when you do need to know, you’ll

know, and not one minute sooner." I more or less made that up on the spot, but looking back I decided that it was good advice because it is based on the truth that God gives us guidance when we need it and generally that guidance comes just in the nick of time.

A few days later I happened to talk with a friend whose job is ending soon. My friend had been praying for guidance but no direction was coming from heaven. So I shared what I had said to the young couple. The next week I got an e-mail telling me that my friend had chatted with another friend who asked, "Have you ever thought about serving overseas?" No, but my friend was open to the idea. Then came a "chance" meeting with a missionary representative who spoke about all the open doors in other countries. Then my friend found what seemed to be a perfect opportunity in Africa. That led to an e-mail application, references by e-mail, a phone interview, and on Friday of this week I received a message telling me that my friend is moving to Kenya in July to start a new job at a school for the children of missionaries. It's a perfect fit and all the pieces came together at just the right time. That's how God works. We do the knocking and in due season the door opens up for us.

Several weeks ago I was standing in the lobby between services when a couple came up to me with their arms around each other and tears in their eyes. Would I please pray for them because God had worked a miracle in their relationship and right now they were going through a fiery trial. I didn't know the details but I put my arms around them and committed their marriage to God. The next Sunday the wife came up with wonderful news about how God had answered that prayer in a most remarkable way. Later I reflected on the fact that nearly eight years ago the wife had come to see me several times, asking prayer for a marriage that seemed beyond hopeless. And now the answer has

finally come from heaven. Why do some prayers take years to be answered and others are answered immediately? I do not know the answer and find it useless to speculate. But this much is clear. If we keep on knocking at heaven's door, sooner or later the door will be opened to us.

"It has happened"

My final illustration comes from the "The Upper Room" devotional for December 21, 1998. It is written by Stanislaw Grzybek of Ostr

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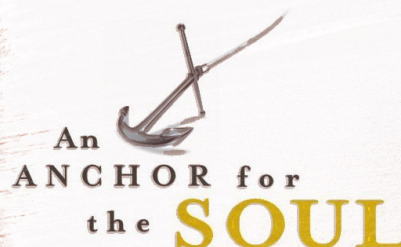
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